

THE RUSA MERAH⁽¹⁾: REFLECTIONS ON A REVOLUTIONARY

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ABSTRACT

In June 1948, the Malayan Communist Party, under the direction of its General Secretary, Chin Peng, launched its armed challenge to British colonial authority in Malaya. The Communist bid for power was destined to be unsuccessful. As leader of the 'armed struggle', much of the responsibility for the events surrounding the challenge must be attributed to Chin Peng. To mark the 40th Anniversary of the Communist challenge to power, this paper offers some observations on his revolutionary leadership. It draws upon a selection of secondary sources and personal interviews conducted by the author.

KEYWORDS: Chin Peng, Malaya, Malaysia, Communism; Communist Party of Malaya, revolution, armed struggle.

"Peace unto ye all!
I come as a friend, not as an enemy.
I come to seek my living, not to make war."

Malay Prayer
(Maxwell 1982:8)

According to Malay legend, the impenetrable jungles of the peninsula are inhabited by a pantheon of Spirits, known collectively as the *hantu hutan*, spirits of the forests. These formidable forces combine to waylay, seduce and haunt the unsuspecting traveller. Prospective wayfarers were, therefore, well advised to seek the blessings of these spectral guardians of the gloom (Maxwell 1982:8-9).

In more recent years, the forests were also the domain of a less ethereal presence, armed guerrillas of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) under the direction of their enigmatic General Secretary, Chin Peng (see Fig. 1). The embodiment of the *jinggi*, a guardian spirit of the deer, Chin Peng eluded capture, escaped death and developed the facility to confuse and confound his enemies. His activities remain shrouded in mystery, his fate and whereabouts unknown.

General Secretary Chin Peng, leader of the Communist revolution in Malaysia, remains the quintessential enigma.

Under his leadership, the Communist Party plunged Malaya into a period of political violence and crisis unprecedented in

scope even by the war. Since the close of the so called "Emergency" Chin Peng's Communists have continued their "Revolution", albeit in sporadic form, from their jungle sanctuaries in north Malaya and southern Thailand.

During Chin Peng's period as political "Supremo", the CPM launched a revolution, suffered both military and political defeat, underwent a series of rectification campaigns, ideological traumas and two major divisions.

Under his tutelage, the Malayan Communist movement has, however, had a profound influence on the direction of Malaysian politics since 1945. His depleted forces still command the attentions of a sizeable component of the Malaysian Security Forces and the spectre of Communism still invokes considerable disquiet in both Malaysia and Singapore.

In an indirect sense, the CPM has been remarkably successful in achieving many of its stated aims and objectives. These successes have been achieved, ironically, at the expense of power sharing.

Clearly then, Chin Peng is a political leader well worthy of study. It is an interesting omission in the historiography of Malaysia therefore that little is known about

¹ The Red Deer.



Fig. 1. Chin Peng at age 24 wearing the uniform of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army.

him. To date there are no biographical accounts of either Chin Peng the man or Chin Peng the politician. Both the public and private face of the man remain shrouded in obscurity, an obscurity engendered both by circumstance and intent.

Given the paucity of material, this study does not presume to be a biography of the bicycle shop owner's son who aspired to politics. It is, rather, an unfinished portrait of a revolutionary. A portrait that might, hopefully, shed some insights into the life and times of Chin Peng, citizen.

To judge the revolutionary is to know something of the man. Unfortunately, this is where the published record begins to fall short. However, drawing upon a selection of secondary sources, the following resume of Chin Peng is proffered.

Ong Boon Hua. (Sometimes Wang Wenhua) alias Chin Peng. Born 1922 in Sitiawan, Perak. Chin Peng was the second son of Hokkien immigrant parents from Fukien Province in Southeast China. His parents owned a bicycle agency. Educated to secondary level at both the Nan Hwa High School in Sitiawan and the Chun Lin High School, Penang. Known to be studious, he studied Chinese in the mornings and English in the afternoons, finishing school at 15. He joined the Communist movement

at 18 cutting stencils for the propaganda department. After the Japanese invasion he became involved with the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) rising to officer rank (Perak State Secretary and Central Executive Committee member). In this capacity he worked closely as liaison officer between the MPAJA and officers from Force 136. It is held in some quarters that he travelled to London as part of the MPAJA "Victory Contingent". Later he was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his services against the Japanese. In 1946-47 it is believed he travelled to either China or Hong Kong for discussions with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials. Elected Chairman of the Political Bureau (General Secretary) in 1947 following the Lai Tek scandal and presided over the Party's turn to armed struggle in 1948. In 1955 he initiated the unsuccessful Baling Peace Talks. In 1970-4 the Party split into three factions over, amongst other reasons, the question of his leadership. He retained his position as General Secretary of the CPM (Orthodox) faction.

Personal details: Married (wife's name Li Chah). Height 5'7". Slim build, fair complexion. Walks with a slight limp in right leg. Known to have been a smoker. Suffered severe and recurring illness (probably beriberi) in the jungle which, it is believed, necessitated medical treatment in China. Fluent in Malay, English, Mandarin and several Chinese dialects. Present location unconfirmed. (Compiled from a selection of references listed below, *esp.* Barber 1981; Biographical Cuttings; Chapman 1950; Cheah Boon Kheng 1979, 1983; Hanrahan 1971; Xiulan 1983).

Given that these biographical details are subject to question, the only reasonable deductions that can be made from them are that Chin Peng was of middle class background, reasonably well educated, enjoyed a comparatively rapid ascent into the leadership structure of the Communist organisation and at a young age had thrust upon him the responsibility of directing the movement through its most turbulent period.

In order to gain a deeper perspective of the man and his times, it behoves the student to look beyond the immediate biographical details and examine the question of education and other formative influences that doubtless contributed to determining the psyche, not only of the young Chin Peng, but

the *weltanschauung* of his peers and later colleagues in arms.

The provincial town of Sitiawan is 11 kilometres from the beach resort and naval base at Lumut on the west coast of the peninsula. A short ferry ride across the Dindings Channel is the island of Pangkor.

Sitiawan is the heartland of the region known as "the Dindings" and serves as the entrepot for the resource rich hinterland of Perak, namely the tin belt of the Kinta Valley. Situated at the edge of the Dindings estuarine mudflats, Sitiawan looks out towards the curious moonscape of the Kinta mines to the east.

Socially and politically, the area is distinguished by its large, well established and close Chinese community. A community that has, in the past, been fractured by Kuomintang (KMT) backed Triads and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) jockeying for power and influence over the region. (Blythe 1969:380).

Like its surrounds, Sitiawan is unremarkable, flat and neatly intersected by its only set of traffic lights. The recently constructed modern highway from Ipoh to Lumut rushes through the town under the gaze of the double storey rows of Chinese houses with their distinctive twin gables and red tiled roofs.

Born into a commercial family, the young Chin Peng may have had the opportunity to follow in the family tradition of commerce. It is recorded that he was studious and scholarly, indicating an above average intelligence.

He had both an English and Chinese education through which he would have been subject to the conflicting values of both nascent Chinese chauvinism and English colonialism. During his secondary school days, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, stories of soviet and peoples courts during the disturbances at the Batu Arang coal fields might well have stirred the imagination of the would be revolutionary.

The wide straight streets of Sitiawan and its flat surrounds, its mixture of European and Chinese commerce and the social mix of rural workers and the nascent proletariat of the Kinta mines, doubtless touched the sensitivities of the young idealist.

And where best to direct this radical energy? The choice, the KMT or MCP. Perhaps the latter were better organised, had

more direct appeal or were intellectually more profound. Forsaking his relatively privileged and intellectual background, Chin Peng made his choice. At the age of eighteen he launched himself into a career in radical politics.

The reasons for so doing are, perhaps, not so difficult to fathom. Despite his middle class background, he was born into an area of mining and capital, an area with a burgeoning industrial proletariat and resurgent Chinese nationalism. It was, after all, the age of idealism.

Exactly when and how Chin Peng joined the Party the published record does not yet tell us. However during the war he quite obviously became drawn into the MPAJA at a senior level. His education, intelligence and experience doubtless contributed to his rapid promotion.

Chin Peng first appears in the historic record in the pages of Spencer Chapman's *The Jungle is Neutral*. Chapman was to describe his colleague at arms as "... Britain's most trusted guerrilla representative", and "My old friend ..." (Chapman 1950:106, 220).

At the age of 22, Chin Peng found himself spokesman at the historically significant Blantan Conference between the MPAJA and Force 136. (Chapman 1950:225-6). His demeanour, intelligence and ability obviously impressed Chapman and his colleagues. Richard Broome recalled:

We got in touch with the Communist organisation and in particular with Chin Peng, their number two man, who was really the organising brains in the field ... we always found Chin Peng easier to talk to. He was a genuine Communist alright. But we always reckoned that we could trust his words. And he was very frank. And he was very different from many others that I'd met. (Interview with Richard Broome, Oral History Department of Singapore, 9 April 1984).

Thus he is seen as being a good administrator, a dedicated Communist and a man of integrity. After the war it is accepted by some writers that Chin Peng had been rewarded for his services to the war effort by the British and had attended the Victory Parade in London as part of the MPAJA contingent.

This claim has long been disputed by the distinguished Malayan psy-ops officer, Tan Sri C.C. Too, who stated in an interview in

1976 that Chin Peng in fact did not go to London (*New Nation* 6.1.76). To put his case more forcefully, in a recent letter to the *Far Eastern Economic Review* he claimed:

Chin Peng never attended the Victory Parade in London in 1946. I was personally introduced to him at an indoor rally held on the premises of the MPAJA Ex-Comrades Association at Peel Road, Kuala Lumpur, to welcome the return of the MPAJA contingent from the Victory Parade (Tan Sri C.C. Too, Letters to the Editor, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3.12.87).

Be that as it may, the point is amply made that the details of Chin Peng's activities are subject to misinterpretation and debate. Suffice to say on the subject that on 6 January 1946, Earl Mountbatten presented campaign ribbons to eight MPAJA commanders, of whom Chin Peng was one.

During the open and legal struggle of 1945–48, the Party's leadership remained underground, leaving the front running in the capable hands of the convoluted network of Communist front agencies. The history of the personalities involved in these is elegantly detailed in Cheah Boon Kheng's study, *The Masked Comrades*.

Gerald de Cruz was one of the key figures in this front activity. It is worth noting his comments on Chin Peng:

... we hero worshipped these patriots. These marvellous nationalists as we saw them. And it was this hero worshipping which made a tremendous impact on me. And after the whole of my pre-war world had been shattered, it was the example of these people that inspired me to believe that after the war we would be able to organise ourselves into an independent state and run that state efficiently ... I found Chin Peng a very very warm and loveable character. He was quiet, he was unassuming, he always had a little smile on his face. He always seemed to be the perfect Gentleman. But later, when I got to know him better, I discovered that he had a core of steel, right inside him. Economic chaos first he said. Instead of calling for individual strikes as we've been doing before, we are going to call for nationwide strikes by occupation. All the rubber workers will be pulled out, Malaya's major industry. Then, all the tin workers will be pulled out while the first strike is unsettled. So you have the two major industries crippled. Then we'll call all the dock workers out and the country will be, by then, after a few months time, in a

state of total, economic chaos. And mind you, through the Pan Malayan Federation of Trade Unions, 80% of the workers of Malaya were under the direct control of the Communist Party of Malaya. (Interview with Gerald de Cruz in *The End of Empire* Granada Television, 1985, Episode — Malaya).

De Cruz's testimony adds eloquent support for both Chin Peng's administrative abilities and his grasp of the political realities of Malaya. It also poses an intriguing question about his leadership style. De Cruz quite clearly casts Chin Peng in the role of a moderate though tough minded politician.

Several writers suggest however, that the Chin Peng ascendancy heralded the triumph of the radicals over the moderate faction, hence the turn to armed struggle. For example, only recently C.C. Too suggested that internal factors within the MCP determined that Chin Peng had no choice but to resort to desperate measures:

In short, the MCP was facing collapse and desperate measures were needed to keep the comrades from further deserting. In addition, with the 'abseondment' of Secretary-General Loi Tek, who had insisted upon the party taking to the 'semi-open, semi-legal peaceful struggle', the young militants headed by Chin Peng took over, while the hawks in the middle and lower ranks could no longer be restrained from taking matters into their own hands to show their disgust at the 'capitalist and effete policy' of Loi Tek' (Tan Sri C.C. Too: *op. cit.*).

Mr Chiu Chen is an ex Central Committee Member of the Communist Party of Malaysia (formerly CPM ML) and Deputy Commander of the Second Military Zone. In an extensive interview with this author he supported Too's argument:

The Central Committee, led by Chin Peng, clarified why the lines were switched. In the view of Chin Peng, they (the Party) should not have given up their arms in 1945 and should have continued the armed struggle like the Vietnamese Communists (Interview with Chiu Chen, *Betong*, 2.12.87).

The published record generally accepts that Chin Peng, as described above, was a bookish, studious young man, possessed of above average intelligence and a good education. An unidentified intelligence officer who knew him described his temperament:

His speech was very quiet, very calm. But he had a sort of presence, not the sort of arrogant presence, a sort of scholarly pre-

sence which commands respect (Interview in *End of Empire*, Granada Television, 1985, Episode — Malaya).

In a separate interview another intelligence officer, possibly the same one, expanded:

He was what you might call the scholarly type. He was well spoken and neither conceited nor rabble-rousing in his speech (Interview in *The Asia Magazine*, April 25, 1965).

Cheah Boon Kheng, in his study of the MPAJA, has suggested that Chin Peng was being groomed by Lai Tek as his second in command. He supports his argument by suggesting that Chin Peng was widely known "... as Lai Tek's little boy" and that his rapid promotion to the Central Committee and the Military High Command was attributed directly to Lai Tek's patronage (Cheah Boon Kheng 1983:92).

According to Cheah, Chin Peng was obviously personally selected by Lai Tek and admitted to the inner sanctums of the Party workings, in itself a conspicuous feat given Lai Tek's deviousness and notorious circumsppection.

Yet, despite this apparent closeness, it is intriguing that Chin Peng is widely presented as being instrumental in exposing his mentor's perfidy to the Party. Cheah is convinced of Chin Peng's militancy:

The militant wing of the MCP, led by Yeong Kuo and Chin Peng, had begun its investigations and was apparently encouraging Communist agitation and labour unrest to oust Lai Tek or make him change his moderate policies (Cheah Boon Kheng 1983: 257).

How then does the radical Chin Peng contrast with the picture of a sober, dedicated and clear thinking administrator? A man more likely to be moderate and circumspect in his actions. It begs the question as to why such a man should want or feel compelled to direct his fellows into a precipitous conflict with one of the world's major powers.

Possibly a moderate at heart, Chin Peng might well have been obliged to support the line of armed struggle by the Central Committee or, quite simply, events themselves dictated his actions.

Reluctantly or otherwise, Chin Peng was cast in the role of revolutionary leader at the head of the Malayan Races Liberation Army, whose avowed intent was to rid

Malaya of the British and the creation of a socialist society. As a revolutionary, his leadership style, like that of his predecessor, was characterised by reclusivity.

The authoritative monthly, *Pan Malayan Review of Security Intelligence*, prepared by Special Branch, sheds a valuable insight into this leadership style. Paraphrasing the Central Committee's June 1949 resolutions, the Review stated:

In regard to the problem whether or not the leaders should come into the open, it was resolved that, if deemed necessary, the Secretary General should alone disclose himself through the medium of the Party's newspaper and that no formation lower than the State Committee should be informed. (Special Branch 1949:397)

This intriguing, if ambiguous caveat on the public activities of the leadership structure of the Party stands in direct contradiction to the first and foremost obligation of a leader, namely, to lead. It is, arguably, difficult to lead by remote control and this was, in this writer's opinion, the core of the leadership problem with the Party.

Communist leadership in Malaya has traditionally been of a reclusive nature for both security and personal reasons. This very reclusivity had the consequence of alienating the leadership from the rank and file Party membership. The obsessive secrecy surrounding the activities of the Central Committee had another unforeseen effect, in that it also alienated the leaders from the very masses of which they purported to be at the vanguard.

This criticism of the leadership style of the Party is supported by Chiu Chen:

There is a great difference between an armed struggle and a constitutional struggle. In armed struggle the emphasis is on secrecy for security sake. Because the leader is living in the jungle, the people cannot see him or have access to the CPM leadership. And the members who are in different units cannot have a chance to see the leadership. Secondly, a negative side of the style of leadership is that they adopted a style of leadership detached from the masses and the grass roots (Interview with Chiu Chen by the author, Betong, 2.12.87).

Party leaders were unable to project the necessary charisma requisite for nation building. Effectively denied legitimacy by the authorities, the Communists were por-

trayed to the masses as a shadowy, miasmic group intent on destroying Malayan society.

What of Chin Peng as a revolutionary commander? Chiu Chen served throughout the armed struggle:

Since the June 20 incident, the armed struggle met with a lot of setbacks, a lot of failures, so in the end we were forced to retreat to the Thai border. From this fact alone shows the weaknesses of Chin Peng as a military commander (*ibid*).

Given the complexities of the campaign and the effectiveness of British counter insurgency measures, Chiu is perhaps a harsh critic. Nonetheless, despite their undoubted successes, the Liberation Army was defeated on the field of battle. Ultimately, the test of a commander's prowess is his ability in the field. In this respect Chin Peng undeniably had his shortcomings.

What of Chin Peng the politician? In 1955 he emerged for the first and only time to public scrutiny at the Baling Peace Talks. For a brief few days he was in the light of the international media before stepping back into the forests.

The media accorded him notoriety. One commentator was moved to exclaim on seeing Chin Peng:

All necks crane for a glimpse of the number one terrorist. There he is, that's him, Chin Peng, the man responsible for a brutal seven year campaign of murder and terrorism against the ordinary people of Malaya (*End of Empire*, Granada Television, 1985, Episode — Malaya).

Chin Peng had initiated the talks. His object in so doing was a gamble to regain the political initiative that was fast slipping away from the Communists. In a sense, this gamble must be seen as an act of supreme political courage. Loss of prestige, both within and outside the Party, would be the necessary corollary to failure.

The Government delegation, led by Tunku Abdul Rahman, was intransigent. The talks broke down. The Tunku succinctly came to the essence of the disagreement:

We were fighting for independence. They were fighting to establish a Communist state (Interview with Tunku Abdul Rahman by the author, Penang, 18.3.87).

The failure of the talks, by all accounts, was a bitter blow to Chin Peng. He was to say to his old friend and former Force 136 colleague John Davis, who, in a reversal of roles

was acting as liaison officer between Chin Peng's party and Government:

I know that the Tunku said that there was to be no talk of terms, it was only to be surrender; I admit I know that. But you see, when people come out to talk, you always give a little bit, take a little bit, you always do it that way. And I assumed completely that he would. I can't understand why he didn't give away a little bit (Lapping 1985: 183-4).

The failure of the talks dissolved the Communist's last hope of achieving political influence in the country they had, in their own way, fought so hard for.

Concerning Chin Peng, the Tunku spoke of the quiet respect he had for a man who fought for a cause he believed in:

... a man of principle ... he is a kindly looking man, he doesn't look like a killer. He looked too clean to be a revolutionary, he looked more like a businessman ... (Interview with Tunku Abdul Rahman: *op. cit.*).

And, in typically generous and humorous fashion, when asked about Chin Peng's organisational ability, the Tunku replied, '... because it caused so much trouble, I assume it was good.' (*ibid*)

Davis described his encounter with Chin Peng on the lonely jungle fringe near Klian Intan:

And behind them emerged Chin Peng, moving very slowly. He came up to me and we greeted each other in Cantonese and shook hands and strolled up the path to the waiting vehicles ... Chin Peng was very changed from when I'd last known him. He'd become very much bulkier and heavier. And it was quite obvious after a short time that that was not mere fat. It was oedema from beriberi, which I think was somewhat to his credit. Many rumours had gone around about how he was living it up in Siam in complete comfort. This obviously was not true. He, a true leader, was still sticking by his men (Lapping 1985: 182-3).

At the close of the talks, Chin Peng wandered off into the forests, escorted a short way by his old friend Davis. That was on the 30 December. He has not been seen publicly since.

There is an interesting postscript to the story. It has been suggested to the writer by private sources that the British in fact had plans either to kill or capture Chin Peng after the talks in direct violation of the free pas-

sage terms of the talks. This is supported in Brian Lapping's book of the series *End of Empire*, in which he claims that both the Tunku and David Marshall were convinced that Davis' presence, as he returned to the jungle, was the factor that saved his life (Lapping 1985:184).

This is but idle speculation. But it is nonetheless interesting to contemplate on how very different the history of Malaya might have been had the story been true and put into effect.

The Baling Talks give an excellent insight into Chin Peng the man and Chin Peng the revolutionary. They reveal a hitherto undetermined political shrewdness juxtaposed against a lack of guile and a sensitivity that sat uncomfortably with failure.

Given that, by 1955, the Liberation Army was well on the retreat and the Communist goal of a socialist state was further away from realisation than ever, it is remarkable, to say the least, that Chin Peng's initiative could provoke and command such attention. The British were wary of it and the Tunku could have ignored it. The mere fact that the Talks were held at all must be seen as a political coup for Chin Peng.

The Tunku came to the talks briefed by the British, Chin Peng came with little else save candour and a willingness to parley. The Government delegation, from their position of strength, had no need for compromise nor, for understandable reasons, had they any reason to trust their opposites. Their position left Chin Peng with little room to manoeuvre:

At the Baling Talks, Tunku Abdul Rahman and David Marshall and the others put forward the terms for the CPM members to surrender. These were terms we could not accept at all. This forced us to continue our struggle (Interview with Chiu Chen, *op. cit.*).

There were, however, several options available to Chin Peng. He could have tried to play for time by insisting on further discussions with his Committee. Alternatively he could have acceded to the "terms" and emerged from the forest as a "moderate" man at the head of a body of men and women prepared to work for the "peaceful" reconstruction of an independent Malaya, which would include, *inter alia*, a return to the open and legal struggle. He chose to do neither. His decision indicates both a commitment to

principle and the saving of face as well as an absence of guile, arguably so important in political leadership.

Chin Peng's weakness was that he was not the consummate politician. His leadership style was too diffuse and it might be a case of being damned with faint praise when John Davis said of him:

I always had a great deal of time for Chin Peng. He was by far the most intelligent of all the Communists, calm, polite, very friendly in fact, almost like a British Officer (Barber 1981:216).

His return to the forest signified the end of his political career and the demise of Communism as a creditable political force in Malaya. The Liberation Army retreated deeper into its jungle fastness around the Betong salient and Chin Peng slipped into obscurity. He became a shadowy and enigmatic figure even to his own followers:

Ordinary members of the Party did not have the chance to see Chin Peng, so we didn't know much about him . . . Chin Peng went to China in 1961. Since then nobody has seen him. I have no idea where he is now . . . When I was in the old Party I was unable to ask 'Where is Chin Peng?' If I had, I would have been scolded by my superiors (Interview with Chiu Chen, *op. cit.*).

The Chin Peng-China nexus is intriguing. The region has been beset by persistent rumours that he returned and retired again. A cursory examination of the popular press in Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia on this issue will only serve to confuse the reader. One report in 1982 even went so far as to confidently announce his death (*New Nation*, 25.9.82).

These confused reports doubtless emanate, for variously dissimilar reasons, from a systematic campaign of disinformation by both the CPM and the authorities. From a Communist perspective, it would be deemed necessary to keep alive the symbol of Chin Peng as a sense of continuity and focal point for Party loyalty. For the authorities, any adverse or confused reporting would have the concomitant effect of lowering morale and confusing the lines of authority and legitimacy.

General consensus, as supported by Chiu Chen, would hold that Chin Peng returned to China around 1961 for medical treatment. Whether he returned is open to conjecture.

Arguably the most authoritative and plausible report of his whereabouts and state of health can be attributed to the former CPM Chairman, Musa Ahmad, who returned to Malaysia from Peking:

Chin Peng was still healthy when I left Peking and I believe he is still alive (Eneik Musa Ahmad, in *The Star*, 16.9.83).

Musa Ahmad said that both he and Chin Peng were members of the Chinese Politburo and that he used to meet Chin Peng often during his stay in Peking. He said that Chin Peng had no intentions of surrendering and wanted to continue to live in Peking (*The Star*, 16.9.83).

The question of Chin Peng's invisible leadership remains subject to conjecture and debate. Ex-guerrillas recently interviewed by this author are at a loss to explain his whereabouts. Inquiries made to agencies of the People's Republic have met with the expected, polite expressions of ignorance. Doubtless, in time, truth will prevail. Suffice to say at present that the Ariel nature of Chin Peng's presence must have had an unsettling effect on the direction of the Party and on the morale of its members.

To this end, the leadership question was drawn into sharp focus during the 1970's. In 1970, press reports indicated that a major schism in the Party was taking place. In fact, a bitter internal debate had been the precursor to a factionalisation that was to have serious repercussions for the Party and reflected directly on the leadership of the Malaysian Communist movement.

In September 1970, the 8th Regiment broke away from the Party to form the Communist Party of Malaya — Revolutionary Faction. After ongoing and fractious debate, on 1 August 1974, the Second Military Zone broke away to form the Communist Party of Malaya — Marxist-Leninist Faction (Interview with Mr 'A', Betong, 3.12.87).

The cause of the schism was both prosaic and tragic:

The main cause of the split was that the old Central Committee adopted the line of rectification or purging the Party. They said that most of the new members recruited from Thailand and the border regions were enemy agents. Many of us did not agree with this view. So we said "if you continue to slaughter the new recruits, we will have a bad relationship with the people of the border region. So how are you going to sur-

vive?". This was the main point of contention between us and the old Committee. It was not so much of a conflict of political theory (Interview with Chiu Chen, *op. cit.*).

The accepted authority and legitimacy of the Party was no longer under question, it was actively under siege:

The splinter Communist Party of Malaya (Marxism-Leninism) has issued a declaration of war on the Chin Peng led Communist Party of Malaya, calling for a revolt against the "old revisionist clique" which it accuses of crimes ranging from betrayal to murder. The strongly worded manifesto of the Marxist-Leninist faction also urged "friends in the Communist army and party" to differentiate between the "fragrant" and the "poisonous" flowers, to examine and expose all sins of the old leaders and strip them of their authority (*The Straits Times*, 24.10.74).

In this writer's opinion, the split was a natural consequence of the remote leadership style of the Central Committee. A disenchantment born out of years of frustration, alienation and perceived poor management. This view is supported by Chiu, who was himself to become one of the leaders of the CPM-ML:

My general impression of Chin Peng's Central Committee is that they carried out certain lines that proved to be wrong. It shows that their ideology, method and approach to leadership was wrong. During both the anti-Japanese war and the anti-British war their ideological lines were either Leftist or too Right. They never rectified or admitted their wrongs. Especially during the rectification movement they refused to admit that they committed Leftist mistakes. I am most disappointed about that (Interview with Chiu Chen, *op. cit.*).

The disillusionment with Chin Peng appeared to be complete. One returned guerrilla, in a book on her experiences with the CPM during this period, was scathing in her criticism. In her account, Chin Peng is widely regarded as having abandoned the revolution in 1961 for a life of ease in Peking. She continues by stating that the *Liew Yit Fan*, (Open Central Committee of the CPM) statement issued in 1979 branded Chin Peng as a spy and collaborator of Lai Tek (Xiulan 1983:vii)

Given Chin Peng's closeness to Lai Tek, it is hardly surprising that his critics should use this ploy to discredit him. Given the nature of

politics, especially the internal politics of closed parties, it is natural for leaders to try to identify with success and to absolve themselves of failure or guilt. The events of 1970–74 could not be described as high points in the Party's history. It was only natural that a scapegoat had to be found.

The split proved to be lasting. Despite repeated attempts, the CPM (Orthodox) faction was never able to reassert its authority. Malaysian Communism remained tri-partite until 5 December 1983 when the two breakaway factions merged to form the Communist Party of Malaysia, as opposed to the Orthodox faction which retained in its title "Malaya" (Interview with Mr 'A', Betong, 3.12.87).

On 11 April 1987, the CPM (Malaysia), through its military arm, the Second Military Zone of the Malaysian People's Liberation Army, successfully concluded a negotiated settlement with the Thai Fourth Army. On 28 April, 542 guerrillas emerged from the jungle, laid down their arms and equipment and attended a reconciliation ceremony at a remote jungle clearing near Betong with Thai military and civil dignitaries.

For a substantial number of Chin Peng's erstwhile followers, the armed struggle is over. It remains to be seen whether the remainder follow.

In balance then, how can General Secretary Chin Peng be best evaluated as a revolutionary leader?

The enigma that is Chin Peng raises several important points about the nature of revolutionary leadership and the conduct of revolutionary warfare.

In his classic treatise *On War*, General Carl von Clausewitz observed that military commanders need to have a "genius for war". Part of this genius included the ability to sustain his troops, ". . . by the spark in his breast, by the light of his spirit . . ." (Clausewitz 1982:145) In essence, he argued that the commander's authority could only be maintained through his ability to lead by example and by inspiration.

Aside from "military genius", the revolutionary leader needs astute political skills. It is axiomatic to suggest that it is incumbent upon the leader to mobilise political and civil support to sustain his challenge to authority.

To mobilise a people in the defence of their country requires political authority. To convince a people to take up arms against their country requires a totally different set of political skills and a totally different leadership style.

The successful revolutionary leader must be able to aggregate to himself and embody the hopes and aspirations of those whom he purports to lead. In his study of revolutionary leaders, Jean Lacouture suggests that ". . . authority can be exerted more effectively if embodied in a symbolic figure, a creator of collective identity and mobiliser of energies." (Lacouture 1970:8).

The Communist revolution in Malaya was a distinctively individual revolution. A conventional Maoist challenge to power led by unconventional men in an unconventional environment.

Chin Peng, in his capacity of General Secretary of the Communist Party, was the first amongst equals. Therefore, upon his shoulders must the responsibility for the success or otherwise of the revolution be laid.

There are several ways of adjudging Chin Peng's success as a revolutionary leader. From a straightforward perspective, he was unsuccessful in achieving his goal, inasmuch as he failed to establish a Communist Republic in Malaya. In this light it is tempting to dismiss him as a revolutionary failure.

To do so, however, would be to gainsay the complexities of Malaya's political economy; the intriguing question as to what extent his management style contributed to his own defeat; the direction the Communist movement took under his lengthy stewardship and finally, but by no means least, the indirect successes of the revolution.

Judged against Clausewitz's prescriptions, it is doubtful that he possessed a fully developed "genius for war". Notwithstanding, the revolution he directed occupied the attentions of some hundreds of thousands of opposing troops and police. Without the active support and backing of either the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China he engaged one of the world's major military powers with a comparatively minuscule force for some twelve years. His guerrillas still had the capacity to force the Security Forces of an independent Malaysia to maintain an active and sizeable presence in northern Malaysia.

Judged against Lacouture's prescription, because of the peculiar heterogeneous mix that is Malaysia and his own distinctive leadership style, Chin Peng was unable to project himself as "... a creator of collective identity and mobiliser of energies". (Lacouture 1970:8). Nonetheless, the revolution had a direct effect on British policy in Malaya inasmuch as it decided the framework and timetable for independence, as well as shaping the future direction of both Singapore and Malaysia.

Chin Peng's leadership of the Party and the Liberation Army raises more questions than it answers. Reclusive, secretive, unassuming and deprecatory are all facets of his distinctive leadership style.

To be fair however, in the opinion of this writer, the Party had developed into a highly orthodox and structured hierarchical system, a system that mobilised against open and visible leadership.

The 1934 Constitution of the Party, for example, enshrined many of these structural rigidities. Article 3 spelled out in great detail the "Principles of Party Organisation and its Organisational System", which were founded on the Communist International and in the concept of democratic centralism. Section 3 contains the nub of these principles:

Lower echelons must accept the decisions of senior party echelons, adhere to the iron discipline of the party, and execute the orders of the Communist International and the party leadership organs (Hanrahan 1971:153).

The rigid principles of democratic centralism were given contemporary expression recently. A senior and experienced veteran of the armed struggle, Mr Teck Hua, was a Section Commander with the CPM-ML. During an interview with the writer, Teck Hua was explicit in his faith in the Party leadership:

Because we liked our Communist Party, we liked our leader Chin Peng . . . When we joined the CPM everybody must like our CPM and our leaders . . . our leaders can command us to fight the struggle . . . my opinion is I want freedom, I want democracy (Interview with Teck Hua, Betong, 2.12.87).

The structural rigidities inherent in the Party, coupled with the natural suspicion by fellow Committee members of any "Cult of

Personality" tendencies after the Lai Tek affair, most likely acted as a constraint on Chin Peng's leadership.

Despite however, the immense difficulties of conducting a revolution in difficult terrain under demanding circumstances against an organised and formidable foe, Chin Peng was able to organise and maintain a relatively tight organisation in the field and imbue it with the conviction to keep going. For this, he deserves rightful recognition.

Although he never met Chin Peng, Chiu, like all his fellow Party members, had a deep sense of respect for the leadership structure of the Party:

I felt great respect for Chin Peng as a leader of the Party. After the split, I felt very disappointed, very disillusioned about Chin Peng as a Party leader. Because there was such a big row in the Party and he, as leader of the Party could not calm or settle such rifts and rows within the Party so as to keep the Party intact (Interview with Chiu Chen, *op. cit.*).

It is perhaps a truism to say that Chin Peng was very much a product of his time. Unlike many of his more celebrated revolutionary contemporaries, Chin Peng was a home grown revolutionary leader. He did not have the dubious benefits of foreign training and contacts, nor, more importantly, did he have the *active* sponsorship of a well heeled patron. The Communist revolution in Malaya operated in an ideological, logistic and strategic vacuum. It is hardly surprising that mistakes were made.

Despite these mistakes the Communists considered that there were successes:

There are two great achievements in the Party's history. Firstly, the anti-Japanese war united all the peoples of Malaya to fight against the Japanese. Unfortunately this achievement was betrayed by Lai Tek. Secondly, without the armed struggle led by the CPM, Malaya would not have gained its independence in 1957. Independence was part of the achievement of the CPM. Unfortunately the fruits of the struggle were usurped by others (*ibid*).

On the outskirts of Sitiawan, the local Rotary Club has erected a brightly painted sign on the highway welcoming visitors to their town. If Chin Peng were to revisit his hometown, he would find much changed.

There is still a cycle agency in Sitiawan, but there is also the Dindings Supermarket, a Chinese Emporium and several video repair shops. He might, perchance, remember playing outside John Gray's old warehouse on the main street and he would doubtless gaze in fascination at the obtrusive Cape Cod houses on the west side of town.

He would, however, more likely sit quietly in one of the old coffee houses, a stranger in his own land.

But it seems unlikely that he will ever return to the land in which he played a significant historical role. The merits of that role remain, as always, a matter of perception.

Whatever his failings, Chin Peng dignified his cause with an honesty and reserve that cannot be gainsayed. Like the deer of the forests that were at once his home and his battlefield, he remains an enigmatic figure. An anti-hero in an age of media stars.

Perhaps the most uninhibited comment about him was made to the writer by a young Chinese girl in a remote village in northern Malaya, "... My family knew Chin Peng — he was a good man".

Whilst there are many in Malaysia and Singapore who would not share these sentiments, there are few who would deny Chin Peng's place in history. The embodiment of the spirit of the fleetfooted and retiring deer, he rightly deserves the sobriquet — the Rusa Merah.

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